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RESULTS OF COMMISSION GOVERNMENT IN HOUSTON, TEXAS

BY JEROME H. FARBAR,
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With the dedication this year of a new \$400,000 municipal auditorium of steel and concrete, built out of the general revenues of the city without one cent of graft; the voting of \$1,250,000 bonds for use in deepening and straightening the Houston Ship Channel, and the simultaneous issue of \$500,000 bonds for the construction of the Main street concrete viaduct, bringing in closer communication the south and north ends of the city, the people of Houston are appreciating the great benefits made possible through the inauguration, five and a half years ago, of the commission form of government and its successful administration through the trials of the change, and the supreme test it stood when it took hold of city affairs in 1905, shouldering a floating indebtedness of \$400,000. To-day the commission form of municipal government in Houston has stood the test supreme. Without it, and with the old aldermanic system again in sway, Houston would step backward from the front of the line of progress she is to-day leading in the South. The commission form is the old democratic idea of fairness in a "government by, of and for the people," and is administered without the "recall," but contains the progressive referendum issue, which makes it incumbent upon the commissioners to call a special election on any matter if the election is petitioned for by 500 qualified voters.

Under the charter secured from the legislature of Texas the commission plan was founded in Houston on a basis of a mayor and four commissioners. The election occurred June 27, 1905. The mayor and commissioners are elected by the qualified voters, each commissioner representing the whole city instead of a ward, and not one section at the expense of the other. Other heads of departments are appointed by the mayor, the controller being the only office to be confirmed by the council. Assistants and employees are selected by the heads of departments, and are subject to dismissal whenever their services are not satisfactory, just as in a

private concern. Heads of departments may be dismissed by the mayor, while the commissioners, as well as the mayor, may be impeached by a majority vote of all commissioners elected. Thus, the administration of a city is placed on a business basis. As in the directorate of a corporation, its officers can be removed by a majority vote, while all department heads are responsible to the chief and the various employees responsible to the department head and the mayor. The mayor receives \$4,000 per year and the commissioners \$2,400 each per annum. All devote their entire time to the city service.

Inaugurated in July, 1905, the present government found a floating debt of over \$400,000 and an empty treasury. The city virtually had no credit. There was not a single merchant who desired to transact any business with the local government. Gloomy as the prospect was, the authorities went about their task with a determination to better conditions. Useless and expensive offices were abolished and some consolidated. A national bank was made treasurer of the city, allowing a salary of only \$50 per month for clerk hire, and the bank to pay interest on all balances to the credit of the city. The city attorney was instructed to institute and file suits for delinquent taxes. This caused to flow into the city treasury from this source alone nearly \$100,000 in eight months. By the strictest economy, the administration redeemed, in the first eight months of the term, \$306,202.47 of the old floating debt, besides paying promptly the monthly bills, and the salaries of the employees.

By this time the merchants of the city were anxious to do business with the city government, and credit was restored at home and abroad. In the five and a half years of commission rule, the city of Houston has wiped out all floating debts and has given to the taxpayers out of the treasury, without the issuance of a single bond, the following permanent improvements:

City attorney, Law Library	\$974.10
Assessor and collector, block book system	10,000.00
City Hall, furniture and fixtures	1,123.67
Police department	4,096.03
Fire department, buildings and equipment	66,150.45
Electrical department	26,551.21
Parks	52,007.53
Health department	6,168.26
Streets and bridges	65,714.10

Asphalt plant	\$3,000.00
Auditorium	332,276.02
Ship channel	98,027.40
Sewers	85,212.18
Paving streets	179,261.96
Water department, extension of mains and improvements.....	247,932.02
Wharves and slips	33,109.89
School buildings	340,323.65
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Total improvements	\$1,865,757.17
<hr/> EXTRAORDINARY EXPENSES	
Storrie certificates	73,300.00
Refund paving certificates	120,308.70
Sinking fund	120,220.00
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Making a grand total	\$2,179,585.87

While these improvements were going on the tax rate has been reduced 30 cents on the \$100.

During the five and a half years of the life of the commission form in Houston, no commissioner has ever made a speech during a council session or addressed the council. The business of the city is conducted daily like that of any business concern, heads of departments meeting and consulting the mayor, the head of the corporation, and committees, made up of the heads of departments, transacting business daily. When the commissioners meet in public session each Monday afternoon, it is merely to legalize and make a record of their weekly business transactions. The length of the public meetings ranges from five to fifteen minutes.

In the inauguration of the commission form, wards were abolished. Four commissioners and the mayor took the places of twelve ward aldermen and the mayor. These four commissioners, with the mayor, constitute the legislative department of the city government. The executive power is vested in the mayor. But by ordinance a large portion of the executive and administrative power is sub-divided into different departments. A committee is placed over each department. One of the four commissioners, nominated by the mayor, is active chairman. The mayor and four commissioners are members of each committee. The active chairman practically has control of the affairs of his department, unless his views upon the matter are overruled by the whole committee; but, by the organization of the committees, the active chairman does

his work to a certain extent under the supervisory direction of the mayor, who is, in the last analysis, the head of each committee and the person in whom the executive power ultimately rests.

In brief, the benefits accruing under the commission form of government may be summarized as follows: The floating indebtedness of \$400,000 was wiped out in less than a year. The plan has enabled the present administration, without a bond issue, to erect three excellent brick school buildings at a cost of \$125,000; to build six miles of paving; to expend \$60,000 for public parks and to appropriate \$50,000 for the Houston Ship Channel, exclusive of the recent \$1,250,000 voted therefor by the people of Houston. It has made possible the erection of a \$400,000 municipal auditorium out of the general revenues of the city without one cent of graft. The auditorium seats 7,000 persons and is the finest convention hall in the South. It has cleaned out the gambling houses; abolished variety theatres; discontinued the racing pool rooms, and closed the saloons after 12 o'clock midnight and all day Sunday. There has been adopted a system of block books for the tax department, which enables the board of appraisers to locate the owner of every tract of land in the city and collect the assessment. It has made possible the appropriation annually of a sum exceeding \$500,000 out of the general revenues for public improvements. The commissioners have purchased the city water plant, increased the cost of operation and, within one year, showed earnings of \$10,575.35 without increasing the cost of consumption to the consumer.

Departments operating at losses under the old aldermanic form show profitable return under the new form. For instance, one department, in 1902, cost \$15,986.60 in operating, while the revenues were \$15,172, showing a net loss of \$814. For the year ending 1907, under the commission form of government, the same department was operated at a cost of \$11,074.81 while the gross earnings were \$16,692.75, showing a net earning of \$5,601.19. Matters for adjustment are taken up with the mayor direct, a department head is called in, and the matter settled within an hour. Before, it necessitated a petition to a council, the discussion on the floor, reference to a committee, and final action again in the council chamber. With the exception of the commissioners and controller, every employee may be discharged at a moment's notice by the mayor. What is the result? A harmonious, systematic corps of employees performing

their duties. Each and everyone works for the interests of the city. They know if they do not there is someone who will fill their places. Politics is obliterated from the public schools. The school board is nominated by the mayor and confirmed by the council. They, in turn, select a school superintendent. The teachers are selected for their fitness. No commissioner can even suggest the name of a teacher to the board.

No franchise is granted for a term longer than thirty years. If, at any time within thirty days of its passage, a petition signed by 500 voters is presented, then such a franchise must be submitted to a vote of the people. All franchises are read at three meetings of the council. The charter reserves the right to the city to regulate the rates of all public service corporations. The street railway company, telephone company and other public service corporations pay 1 per cent of their annual income into the city treasury.

In five years under the commission form, the assessed valuation of property in the city of Houston has increased from \$37,000,000 to \$77,000,000, over one-half of which is in building. In these five years the city has increased in population forty per cent. Miles of pavements and sewers, both sanitary and storm, have been constructed. The progress of Houston under commission government is an inspiration. In two years the government was transformed from one threatened with a receivership to one on a cash basis with a half million to spend annually in improvements.